THE BUSINESS OF DEATH: A STUDY ON THE ANTEBELLUM AND WARTIME ACTIVITIES OF UNDERTAKER JOHN A. BELVIN IN RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

Jason C. Spellman

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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Disposing of mortal remains is a behavioral practice unique to human beings. Burial traditions serve as intimate customs that reflect cultural principles and societal responses in confronting the inescapable truth of death. Contemporary practices reveal to us that the preparation and internment of a body is prompt and somewhat ritualized. Strict health and sanitation regulations have largely contributed to this, in addition to commercializing the embalming process into a multi-million dollar industry.[1] But such lucrative procedures were not always established. This is apparent in the Richmond Directory for the Year 1819, which does not reference any individuals as undertakers or funeral practitioners.[2] However, the flourishing urban centers of antebellum America were later home to various funeral entrepreneurs that attained a certain duality within the workforce. These laborers operated local businesses (usually specializing in a form of woodworking) while also contributing to the early stages of undertaking. This class of citizens is exemplified well in Richmond, Virginia. Businessmen became highly successful in managing two fields of occupation and subsequently would often transfer their knowledge and experience to apprentices, many of who greatly enhanced the services offered to the city. By investigating the activities of one local entrepreneur within both public and private sectors in the capital city from 1835 – 1865, we are able to observe social relationships, business connections and early funeral practices that contributed to the subsequent development of a modern community-industry that would become responsible for preserving the memory of the deceased for many generations.

[1] Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 2.

[2] *The Richmond Directory, Register and Almanac, for the Year 1819.* Richmond: John Maddox, 1819.



John Allan Belvin, ca. 1880[3]

Operating one of the largest furniture and lumber companies in the State of Virginia, John Allan Belvin became an influential figure within the manufacturing circles of Southern industry. But, he similarly left a significant impression on the early funeral industry of the city. Through this secondary profession, Belvin developed a network of social and business connections within Richmond that greatly advanced the current and future welfare of its citizens during the nineteenth century.

Originally, the Belvin's had resided in nearby Gloucester County, Virginia as one of the founding families. Born in 1759, John Aaron Belvin was raised in colonial Gloucester County and lived there for most of his life until his death in 1822. At the age of seventeen, he volunteered for service at the outbreak of the American Revolution, enlisting as a private in the local militia. In his day, people considered John Aaron Belvin to be an exceptionally wealthy businessman.[4] Surpassing middle age, he married

[3] J.W. & W.W. Davies, *John Allan Belvin,* ca. 1880, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA.

[4] "Preston Belvin," in *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography,* ed. Lyon Gardiner Tyler (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1915), 4:124-125.

Elizabeth Dobson of England, who bore him three children that would become the second generation of Gloucester County inhabitants.[5] The second oldest child and the only son in the family, John Allan Belvin was born in 1812.

The early nineteenth century proved to be an important and celebratory period that extended familial and business relations. John A. Belvin came to the City of Richmond from Gloucester County in 1835. The following year, on December 22, 1836, he was married to Margaret Ann Durham at the First Baptist Church with the Reverend Jeremiah B. Jeter presiding. Durham descended from an elite Richmond family, and likely met Belvin through related religious and business connections.[6] Together, he and his wife would raise twelve children. Only three years later, his sister Gracey married Henry A. Atkins of Richmond on September 3, 1839. With such a sizeable family of notable province, the occupants of the city and surrounding areas would have become familiar to the Belvin name.

In addition to caring for his own growing family, John Belvin also nurtured his young business. He first entered Richmond as an independent craftsman specializing in cabinetry. He operated out of his shop located on the corner of Franklin and Thirteenth Street for several years before expanding it into a larger wareroom. Belvin still primarily reserved the building for his cabinet-making operations, but he also advertised it for general undertaking. These services would have included preparing the body for

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[5] "John Allan Belvin," Find A Grave, Inc., entry posted July 21, 2008, http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=28445745 (accessed April 22, 2010). Frances Ann "Fanny" Belvin-Rowe (b. 1811), John Allan Belvin (b.1812) and Grace Elizabeth Belvin-Atkinson (b. 1820).

[6] Cowardin and Hammersley, "Died." *Daily Dispatch* (Richmond), December 3, 1861. Margaret Ann Durham was the daughter of John Durham and Mary Till. Durham had been a well-known manufacturer in Richmond, and lived there all his life until his sudden death on November 30, 1861 at the age of seventy-one.

Tyler, "Preston Belvin," 124. Till was born in Augusta County, Virginia and was the great-granddaughter of General Anthony Wayne of the American Revolution.

internment and most importantly, constructing the coffin. Since there was not a large market for undertaking as a comprehensive industry itself, there was consequently no cause for the general production of coffins in Richmond. Thus, the task fell upon independent craftsmen to build vessels for the dead, many of whom may have otherwise focused on a principal craft. For Richmond, these versatile and competent abilities are evident in the prosperous woodworking section of the Capitol District during the mid-nineteenth century. Belvin and his contemporaries were able to capitalize on their chief trade while also managing funerary services. He was also increasing his finances by investing money in residential property around the same time. Land deeds show that on March 30, 1847, John A. Belvin purchased an eighty-two and a half foot plot on the east side of Twenty-third Street from its previous owner, William Cullingsworth for $225.00. Three years later, he sold off fifty-nine feet of the original property to Edward A. I. Clopton for $1380.00. And by 1855, he partnered with Truman A. Paker to form "Belvin & Parker," a lumber dealership located off Broad Street between Twelfth and Fourteenth Streets. The *Daily Dispatch* reflects that, "By his strict attention to business and integrity he amassed a considerable fortune."[7] With the establishment of his local business, John Belvin was financially able to make successful investments that would increase his overall holdings.

He labored in the manufacturing industry within the city for most of his life, developing his own business while also exercising qualities of active citizenship. His commitment to community values and affairs can be noted in his election as the first

[7] "Death of Mr. John A. Belvin," *Daily Dispatch* (Richmond), August 1, 1880.

president of the Mechanics Institute in 1856.[8] Founded in 1854, the institute was the byproduct of an active movement led by mechanics, journeymen, and local employers. Its organizers envisioned a broad but determined academic endeavor, "to promote education in the scientific and mechanic arts and in other subjects relating to the conduct and development of business and industry."[9] Predictably, Belvin found that his own knowledge and experience in business could be applied to the commercial program. In addition, Belvin associated himself with other major companies and civic organizations of the city. He was also the president of the Trust Building Fund Association, sat on the Board of Directors for the State Penitentiary, and had been a longtime consultant for the Planters National Bank and the Richmond Banking and Insurance Company. He was also a member of Jefferson Lodge No. 4, The Independent Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF) for over thirty years, and an honored member of the Masonic fraternity. He was recalled as, "An intelligent, forceful man, and always lent a willing hand to all movements of a public spirited nature."[10] Through his business and involvement with assorted organizations, John Belvin displayed his genuine attachment to the city's residents and earned their trust and affection.

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[8] "Virginia Mechanics Institute," Richmond Public Schools, http://www.richmond.k12.va.us/indexnew/sub/history/VaMechanics.cfm (accessed April 11, 2010). The Virginia Mechanics Institute was a non-profit corporation that offered an evening school. Students had to be at least fifteen years old and of good moral character. It allowed men and boys who worked during the day or were seeking employment, to study technical education. The institute received generous financial support from the municipal government, which made possible to have very modest student fees.

First located on Ninth Street, between Franklin and Main, the institution acquired its property through the contributions and bequests of Richmond citizens interested in its purpose. The original building was destroyed during the burning of Richmond in 1865, but was later relocated to Tenth and Marshall Streets in 1924-1925. It is currently owned by Virginia Commonwealth University, and is the office for the Division of Health Careers/Education and Special Services for Students and University Student Health Services.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Tyler, "Preston Belvin," 124.

On October 16, 1859, the sectional crisis over the moral and political issues regarding slavery erupted into violence. Led by abolitionist John Brown, a group of armed men began an uprising at Harpers Ferry, Virginia with a mission to encourage a slave rebellion in the community and to seize the federal arsenal. The plan was ill-conceived and was quickly suppressed by authorities. The repercussions of the raid is best told by Archivist R. Thomas Crew, Jr. who writes, "Brown's scheme had been financed by wealthy New England abolitionists and focused national attention on an issue that could no longer be placated by compromise. As a result, regional emotions and loyalties quickly became polarized between the Northern Free States and the Southern slave states as the nation plunged irresistibly toward armed conflict." In Virginia, those feelings of fear and urgency are shown in the large quantity of provisional militias that responded to the national event. This important duty directly exhibited one's devotion to the community and native state. The genuine and close-knit ties that were formed in Southern communities brought together through relationship alliances and collective endeavors were cause enough to defend with one's life for. Even at age forty-seven, John Belvin was no such exception. He volunteered for service as a private in the One hundred seventy-ninth Regiment of Virginia Militia, comprised of men in the City of Richmond, and participated in active service whenever he was called to do so.

As a man in middle age, Belvin was not as physically fit as his younger companions preparing for inevitable civil war. Instead, he continued to reside in Richmond,[11] caring for his lumber business and participating in local meetings to discuss the present condition of the divided nation. His partnership had been dissolved in 1858, but a new

[11] W. Eugene Ferslew, *Second Annual Directory for the City of Richmond* (Richmond: W. Eugene Ferslew, 1860), 47. The Belvin family resided on Broad Street between Ninth and Tenth Streets.

relationship was created with fellow cabinet-maker, D.H. Atkinson.[12] The two formed "Belvin & Atkinson," a furniture dealership that was run out of the original cabinetry and undertaking building before moving to Eighteenth Street in 1859. The following year, it was once again, moved back to the Thirteenth Street building while all undertaking services were moved to Eighteenth. These frequent moves reveal the thriving business that warranted the need for larger and separate workplaces for carrying out cabinet-furniture activities and funeral transactions. An advertisement in *The Daily Dispatch* dated July 15, 1861, shows the literal amount of success his company was producing:

- 140,000 feet White Pine, ½ to 5 inches thick.
- 40,000 feet ½ Poplar, 20 to 26 inches wide.
- 10,000 feet 4-4 Poplar
- 30,000 feet Walnut, ½ to 8 inches thick.
- 50,000 feet superior White Ash, suitable for gun carriages.
- 200,000 feet Rock maple
- 10,000 feet Mahogany, ½ to 8 inches thick.
- 120,000 feet 5-4 Dressed Flooring.
- 40,000 feet 5-4 Undressed Flooring.
- 30,000 feet 5-4 step Plank.
- 25,000 feet 6-4 step Plank.
- 100,000 feet 4-4 Boards.
- 20,000 feet ½ Panel Boards.
- 150,000 feet Sycamore.
- 100,000 feet Joice and Scantling.
- 75,000 Shingles.

Source: Cowardin and Hammersley, "John A. Belvin, Lumber Dealer," 1861.

He assured customers that, "All of the above [wood] is well seasoned and of good quality."[13] Most importantly, he listed twenty-five thousand feet of half-inch Mahogany,

[12] W. Eugene Ferslew, *First Annual Directory for the City of Richmond*, (Richmond: George M. West Printers, 1859), 44. The lumberyard still remained in Belvin's sole possession.

[13] Cowardin and Hammersley, "John A. Belvin, Lumber Dealer," *Daily Dispatch* (Richmond), July 15, 1861.

"suitable for Coffins."[14] This additional quantity is important because it shows that Belvin and Atkinson were allocating an additional sum of lumber specifically to support the undertaking services of the business. Furthermore, the amount is more than double that of the wood used for general purpose. This inventory would suggest that his undertaking services were in high demand by the mid-nineteenth century and that additional raw material was important enough for investment.

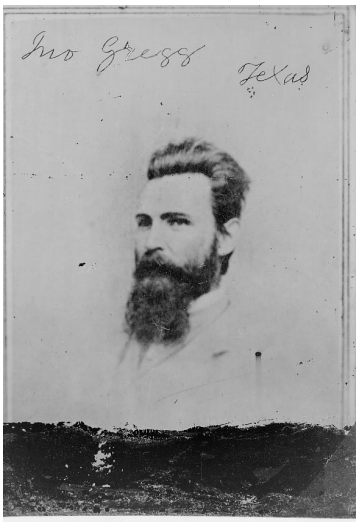
Mortality was not an unfamiliar subject to Americans of the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, individuals of the antebellum period were more accustomed to death than we are today.[15] They experienced a high rate of infant morality but also anticipated that most individuals who reached young adulthood would live into middle age. By the beginning of the 1860s, the rate of death had declined, although improvements in longevity would not be reached until the turn of the century. The American Civil War forced a dramatic shift to the way society had typically confronted death, in addition to transforming the funeral industry. Undertakers began to notice a clientele far different than the expected local families they had been serving for years. Author Drew Gilpin Faust writes, "The war took young, healthy men and rapidly, often instantly, destroyed them with disease or injury. This marked a sharp and alarming departure from existing preconceptions about who should die."[16] And that "the presence and fear of death touched Civil War Americans' most fundamental sense of who they were, for in its threat of termination and transformation, death inevitably inspired self-scrutiny and self-

[14] Ibid.

[15] Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), *xxi*.

[16] Ibid., *xii*.

definition."[17] Such change can be seen in the City of Richmond. The ferocious and bloody military engagements raging around the city's outer defenses cost the lives of thousands of individuals during the course of the war. Death even affected the Confederate high command.



Brigadier General John Gregg, 1862-1864
Library of Congress[18]

One such example was Brigadier General John Gregg of Hood's Texas Brigade, killed on the morning of October 7, 1864 was while leading a counterattack along the old Darbytown Road. His body was retrieved and brought back into Richmond. Gregg was a high-ranking political and military official in his lifetime. Richmonders believed a proper funeral was necessary, and undertaker John Belvin was charged with the task that lay at hand. This demanded an experienced practitioner of the trade that would perform the job flawlessly. And undertaker John Belvin was charged with the task that lay at hand. Instead of crafting a coffin out of regular materials, he encased it in an open-faced metal-

[17] Ibid., *xv.*

[18] "[John Gregg, Brigadier General, C.S.A., head-and-shoulders portrait, facing left.]," Photograph, ca. 1862-1864, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalogue, http://loc.gov/pictures/item/2004682189 (accessed April 22, 2010).

Gallic coffin and draped it with the flag of the Lone Star State.[19] From his establishment, Gregg's corpse was moved to the Hall of the House of Representatives in the capitol building where it lay instate on October 9, 1864. Visitors were permitted to pay their respects at 3:30PM that day. Afterwards, the remains were placed in a hearse drawn by four white horses with the members of the Texas Brigade, the State Guard, a company of artillery, several distinguished civilians and military officers, in addition to a number of mourners and friends trailing behind. They proceeded to Hollywood Cemetery, where the funeral services were conducted by Reverend James A. Duncan. The body was placed in a private vault to await later removal and reburial in his native state. Gregg's funeral was said to be, "one of the most impressive and imposing displays which has taken place in this city on any similar occasion for many years past."[20] Brigadier General John Gregg's death and later funeral was an affair that was deeply emotional for local citizens. Such an immense degree of respect was shown that his death was commemorated through governmental reverence and full military burial. Caring for his mortal remains was supremely important, and the dependability was entrusted to an undertaking service that was highly developed. Military officials may have been hard-pressed in finding another local undertaker that was not more sensitive to their needs and capable for the job as John A. Belvin.

Residing in the capital of the Confederacy during the years of the American Civil War brought certain sacrifices that its residents were forced to endure. Richmond had been the constant symbol and prime psychological objective of the opposing United States Army since 1861. Both sides agreed that its capture and occupation might break

[19] "Funeral of Gen. Gregg," *Daily Richmond Whig*, October 10, 1864.
[20] Cowardin and Hammersley, "Funeral of General Gregg," *Daily Dispatch* (Richmond), October 10, 1864.

the will of the southern people to support the war effort. On April 2, 1865, that possibility was tested as General Robert E. Lee and the battered Army of Northern Virginia were forced to abandon the city and flee westward to avoid annihilation by the Union Army. Mayor Joseph C. Mayo pleaded to the approaching Federal commander, "To preserve order and protect women and children and property," but the retreating Confederate Army had hardly left anything unscathed themselves.[21] An authorization by the Confederate government to destroy warehouses and supplies left much of the factories and houses in the business district in ruins. Sallie Putnam of Richmond vividly recalled:

> As the sun rose on Richmond, such a spectacle was presented as can never be forgotten by those who witnessed it… All the horrors of the final conflagration, when the earth shall be wrapped in flames and melt with fervent heat, were, it seemed to us, prefigured in our capital… Above all this scene of terror, hung a black shroud of smoke through which the sun shone with a lurid angry glare like an immense ball of blood that emitted sullen rays of light, as if loath to shine over a scene so appalling.[22]

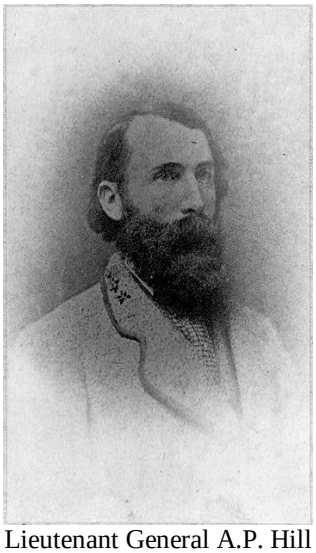
A week later, a number of citizens hastily published a list in the *Richmond Whig* of the properties damaged by the fires. Reported, was John A. Belvin's original cabinetry shop at Franklin and Thirteenth Street estimated at $21,000 in value.[23] Over nearly thirty years, that facility had become an important source of productivity and financial stability. However, Belvin still owned the lumber yard and his undertaking establishment that remains untouched during the burning of Richmond. The success and resourcefulness developed even before the war, proved to become a foundation that even physical damage could not disturb.

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[21] Richmond National Battlefield Park, "Richmond, Embattled Capital, 1861-1865," National Park Service, http://www.nps.gov/rich/historyculture/richmond-story.htm (accessed May 5, 2010).

[22] Ibid.

[23] "The Late Fire," *Daily Richmond Whig*, April 10, 1865.



Lieutenant General A.P. Hill
Library of Congress[24]

Interestingly enough, his business had served yet another Confederate, Lieutenant General A.P. Hill. Hill was killed near the Petersburg, Virginia trench lines on April 2, 1865. His body was brought up to Richmond by ambulance for burial. His nephew, Henry Hill, Jr., accompanied the body halfway on the journey until riding further ahead to consult another relative, G. Powell Hill who resided in the city. He had hoped that the corpse would be buried in Hollywood Cemetery but due to the chaotic nature of the evacuation, it was proposed that it be brought to Hill's native Culpeper County, Virginia. Overcrowded roads and delays at Mayo's Bridge prolonged the arrival of the remains until the early hours the following morning. Brought into the office of Colonel Henry Hill, Sr., it rested in the basement of the Court of Appeals for a coffin.[25] Hill anxiously recalled:

[24] "[Lieut. General A.P. Hill.]," Photograph, ca. 1861-1865, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalogue, http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a00275/ (accessed May 5, 2010).

[25] G. Powell Hill, *"First Burial of General Hill's Remains,"* in *Southern Historical Society Papers,* ed. Rev. J. William Jones, D.D., vol. 19 (Richmond: Southern Historical Society, 1891), 183-186. At the time, the Court of Appeals stood on the southeast corner of Capitol Square at the intersection of Franklin and Twelfth Street.

> Time was pressing us closely, as we were expecting the entrance of the Federal troops into the city at any moment. The stores on Twelfth, Thirteenth, Main, and Cary streets had been broken into, and in many instances sacked and fired. Belvin's furniture store had been opened at both ends, and my cousin and myself entered the rear door, hoping to find a representative to whom we could apply for a coffin. After making repeated calls and receiving no answer, we secured a coffin and took it to a vacant office… We hastily placed the body in the coffin (which was rather small), and putting it in the ambulance, left the city by way of Fourteenth street and Mayo's bridge, slowly and sadly wending our way through Manchester and up the river to my father's refugee home.

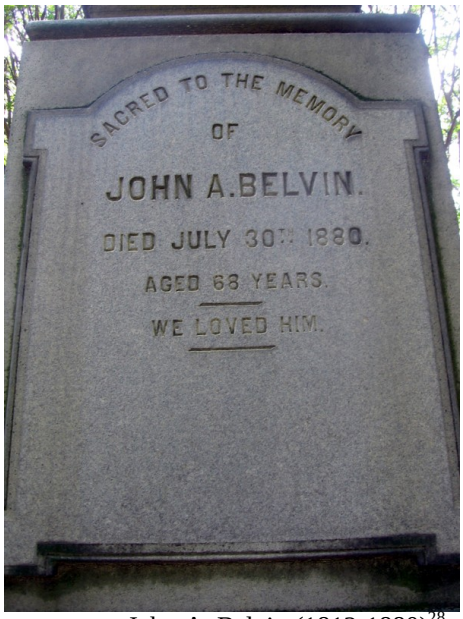
Unfortunately, the fragile condition of A.P. Hill's body did not allow the journey to Culpeper County to be made. He was temporarily buried at the home of Henry Hill, Sr. before being reinterred at Hollywood Cemetery several years later.

From his arrival into the city, to developing his profession and capitalizing on its success even through economic hardships brought on by war, he still remained financial secure as a well-established Richmond inhabitant. His operations in the woodworking quarter continued to thrive during post-war years. Its achievement can be measured by the area of Governor Street being referred to by locals as, "Belvin's Block." As a secure entrepreneur and investor, Belvin even ventured to build the St. James Hotel in the Capitol District and became its owner. An important affiliation was made that greatly contributed to the city's funeral industry during this time. Langdon Taylor Christian, Sr. was the son of a Charles City County farmer who took to manual labor rather than educational studies. At the age of eighteen, he left the family farm to work in the city. For a time, he labored in a tobacco factory before entering employment with the leading furniture and undertaking establishment of John A. Belvin in 1872. Although Christian had only acquired a basic education, he excelled within the company and became a fine finisher, varnisher, and cabinet and casket maker. His abilities greatly impressed Belvin, and nearing the age of sixty, caused him to reflect on the future of his enterprise.

Belvin continued to participate in community affairs with his various civic organizations while leaving most of his business responsibilities to his sons. In 1880, he succumbed to an illness that had left him debilitated for weeks. Shortly before midnight on the last day of July, he gave way to Death, ending their long-term earthly partnership. He died at the age of sixty-eight. Reflecting on his passing, the *Daily Dispatch* announced that it had been, "The end of an honorable and busy life."[26] John Allan Belvin was remembered as:

> A good citizen, an honest man, a devoted husband and father, and a true friend. In his death Richmond sustains a serious loss. He was of that class of merchants who have made the name of Richmond honored at home and abroad; of that class of citizens who never failed fully to discharge every trust incumbent upon them. His family lose a kind and faithful protector and the mechanics of the city one who ever studied their interest.[27]

Funeral services took place at four o'clock the following day, at the same church where he had been married and for years attended services.



John A. Belvin (1812-1880)[28]


Granite Obelisk Monument[29]

[26] *Daily Dispatch* (Richmond), 1880.
[27] Ibid.
[28] "John Allan Belvin," Find A Grave, Inc., 2008.

He was interred in Section H of Hollywood Cemetery, with a large granite obelisk erected in his memory. The monument was inscribed, "We loved him." It remains a physical reminder of the legacy and considerable amount of influence he had left.

Preparations were made immediately following his death. The "John Belvin & Son" lumber business in the city was dissolved, and all succeeding transactions were taken over by his son, Charles E. Belvin.[30] His other son, Preston Belvin also entered in the same business and successfully ran it until its demise in 1893, when a fire destroyed the entire plant.[31] Apprentice L.T. Christian, Sr. was given ownership over the funeral services, and reorganized that line of work into the "L.T. Christian Funeral Home." Under new direction, the secondary services that Belvin began were greatly expanded. The prodigious talent that Christian had demonstrated earlier, continued to shine in his own ventures. As a funeral director, he (and later his successor and son, L.T. Christian, Jr.) became meticulous in keeping detailed records of every client that requested his services. This involved initiating and filing the required death certificate with the state authorities and posting obituaries in the local newspapers. These documents required compiling an immense amount of genealogical details pertaining to the individual, including his or her full name, date and place of birth, date and place of death, cause of death, marital status, spouse's name, parent's names and places of birth, residence address, occupation, military service, education, religious affiliation, burial location, and surviving family members.[32] Among these records were prominent Richmond citizens

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[29] Ibid.

[30] "Dissolutions & Partnerships, Notice," *Daily Dispatch* (Richmond), April 6, 1880.

[31] Tyler, "Preston Belvin," 124.

[32] Alex Lorch, "Funeral Home Records Document Richmond's Citizenry," Library of Virginia http://www.virginiamemory.com/reading_room/virginiana/funeral_home_records_document_richmonds_citizenry (accessed February 9, 2010).

such as, former Virginia governor James H. Price, department store founder Webster S. Rhoads, renowned authors Douglas Southall Freeman and James Branch Cabell, and founder of U.S. Foil Company Richard S. Reynolds, Sr. These sales agreements are important because they humanize file records into personal and accurate histories of local citizenry of Southern society and illustrate the familial networks that are associated with them. Without the early influence of John Belvin's undertaking business, Christian may have never excelled in this profession and many well-documented generations would have gone unaccounted for.

The detailed records that the L.T. Christian Funeral Home kept are the byproducts of a funeral professionalism that took decades to develop into a modern industry. Beginning in the Antebellum Period, undertaking in the City of Richmond had only been a service that accompanied other occupations of associated labor. Nevertheless, the trade was not troublesome or inconvenient for skilled workers, rather funeral services only contributed to the continual growth of business itself in addition to creating the need for an independent industry. In observing the life of entrepreneur John A. Belvin, we are able to further understand how his business and social relationships helped shape the early urban undertaking of one Southern city into an occupation that was important enough to be taught from one generation to another. Funeral undertaking was a community-based trade that citizens relied on for personal assistance and care when it came to meeting death and remembering the dead. These burial traditions are important because they reflect how nineteenth century society sought to methodically deal with morality. It is worthwhile comparing historic and modern concepts of death so that we might find better solutions to an issue that affects us all.

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